

STORIES BY
THEODORE
STURGEON

A TOUCH OF *Sturgeon*

SELECTED
AND
INTRODUCED
BY
DAVID
PRINGLE



SIMON  SCHUSTER

ETHER BREATHER

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Until the early seventies, Theodore Sturgeon (Edward H. Waldo) was the most heavily reprinted writer in the science fiction universe. This was a richly deserved honor, for he had produced a long line of outstanding, well-crafted stories featuring memorable characters. Working within the fantasy and science fiction genres, he excelled at both, and influenced an entire generation of writers, including Ray Bradbury.

Here is his first published story—one that exhibits all of the talent he would develop and nurture in succeeding years.

(Good Heavens! I've known Ted Sturgeon for forty years and never knew till now that that wasn't his real name. Are you sure, Marty? Anyway, an editor said to me once, "If you had to publish a collection of stories by Theodore Sturgeon, what would you call it?" I thought for a while and said, "Caviar!" The editor said triumphantly to someone else who was in the office, "See!!!" and that was indeed the name of the collection. IA)

Yes, Isaac, I'm sure. He legally changed his name to Sturgeon when his mother remarried.

It was "The Seashell." It would have to be "The Seashell." I wrote it first as a short story, and it was turned down. Then I made a novelette out of it and then a novel. Then a short short. Then a three-line gag. And it still wouldn't sell. It got to be a fetish with me, rewriting that "Seashell." After a while editors got so used to it that they turned it down on sight. I had enough rejection slips from that number alone to paper every room in the house of tomorrow. So when it sold—well, it was like the death of a friend. It hit me. I hated to see it go.

It was a play by that time, but I hadn't changed it much. Still the same pastel, froo-froo old "Seashell" story, about two children who grew up and met each other only three times as the years went on, and a little seashell that changed hands each time they met. The plot, if any, doesn't matter. The dialogue was—well, pastel. Naive. Unsophisticated. Very pretty, and practically salesproof. But it just happened to ring the bell with an earnest, young reader for Associated Television, Inc., who was looking for something about that length that could be dubbed "artistic"; something that would not require too much cerebration on the part of an audience, so that said audience could relax and appreciate the new polychrome technique of television transmission. You know; pastel.

As I leaned back in my old relic of an armchair that night, and watched the streamlined version of my slow-moving brainchild, I had to admire the way they put it over. In spots it was almost good, that "Seashell." Well suited for the occasion, too. It was a full-hour program given free to a perfume house by Associated, to try out the new color transmission as an advertising medium. I liked the first two acts, if I do say so as shouldn't. It was at the half-hour mark that I got my first kick on the chin. It was a two-minute skit for the advertising plug.

A tall and elegant couple were seen standing on marble steps in an elaborate theater lobby. Says she to he:

"And how do you like the play, Mr. Robinson?"

Says he to she: "It stinks."

Just like that. Like any radio-television listener, I was used to paying little, if any, attention to a plug. That certainly snapped me up in my chair. After all, it was my play, even if it was "The Seashell." They couldn't do that to me.

But the girl smiling archly out of my television set didn't seem to mind. She said sweetly, "I think so, too."

He was looking slushily down into her eyes. He said: "That goes for you, too, my dear. What is that perfume you are using?"

"Berbelot's Doux Reves. What do you think of it?"

He said, "You heard what I said about the play."

I didn't wait for the rest of the plug, the station identification, and act three. I headed for my visiphone and dialed Associated. I was burning up. When their pert-faced switchboard girl flashed on my screen I snapped: "Get me Griff. Snap it up!"

"Mr. Griff's line is busy, Mr. Hamilton," she sang to me. "Will you hold the wire, or shall I call you back?"

"None of that, Dorothe," I roared. Dorothe and I had gone to high school together; as a matter of fact I had got her the job with Griff, who was Associated's head script man. "I don't care who's talking to Griff. Cut him off and put me through. He can't do that to me. I'll sue, that's what I'll do. I'll break the company. I'll—"

"Take it easy, Ted," she said. "What's the matter with everyone all of a sudden, anyway? If you must know, the man gabbing with Griff now is old Berbelot himself. Seems he wants to sue Associated, too. What's up?"

By this time I was practically incoherent. "Berbelot, hey? I'll sue him, too. The rat! The dirty—What are you laughing at?"

"He wants to sue you!" she giggled. "And I'll bet Griff will, too, to shut Berbelot up. You know, this might turn out to be really funny!" Before I could swallow that she switched me over to Griff.

As he answered he was wiping his heavy jowls with a handkerchief. "Well?" he asked in a shaken voice.

"What are you, a wise guy?" I bellowed. "What kind of a stunt is that you pulled on the commercial plug on my play? Whose idea was that, anyway? Berbelot's? What the—"

“Now, Hamilton.” Griff said easily, “don’t excite yourself this way.” I could see his hands trembling—evidently old Berbelot had laid it on thick. “Nothing untoward has occurred. You must be mistaken. I assure you—”

“You pompous old sociophagus,” I growled, wasting a swell two-dollar word on him, “don’t call me a liar. I’ve been listening to that program and I know what I heard. I’m going to sue you. And Berbelot. And if you try to pass the buck onto the actors in that plug skit, I’ll sue them, too. And if you make any more cracks about me being mistaken, I’m going to come up there and feed you your teeth. Then I’ll sue you personally as well as Associated.”

I dialed out and went back to my television set, fuming. The program was going on as if nothing had happened. As I cooled—and I cool slowly—I began to see that the last half of “The Seashell” was even better than the first. You know, it’s poison for a writer to fall in love with his own stuff; but, by golly, sometimes you turn out a piece that really has something. You try to be critical, and you can’t be. The Ponta Delgada sequence in “The Seashell” was like that.

The girl was on a cruise and the boy was on a training ship. They met in the Azores Islands. Very touching. The last time they saw each other was before they were in their teens, but in the meantime they had had their dreams. Get the idea of the thing? Very pastel. And they did do it nicely. The shots of Ponta Delgada and the scenery of the Azores were swell. Came the moment, after four minutes of icky dialogue, when he gazed at her, the light of true, mature love dawning on his young face.

She said shyly, “Well—”

Now, his lines, as written—and I should know!—went:

“Rosalind ... it is you, then, isn’t it? Oh, I’m afraid”—he grasps her shoulders—”afraid that it can’t be real. So many times I’ve seen someone who might be you, and it has never been ... Rosalind. Rosalind,

guardian angel, reason for living. beloved ... beloved —” Clinch.

Now, as I say, it went off as written, up to and including the clinch. But then came the payoff. He took his lips from hers, buried his face in her hair and said `clearly: “I hate your guts.” And that ” ” was the most perfectly enunciated present participle of a four-letter verb I have ever heard.

Just what happened after that I couldn’t tell you. I went haywire. I guess. I scattered two hundred and twenty dollars’ worth of television set over all three rooms of my apartment. Next thing I knew I was in a ‘press tube, hurtling toward the three-hundred-story skyscraper that housed Associated Television. Never have I seen one of those ‘press cars, forced by compressed air through tubes under the city, move so slowly, but it might have been my imagination. If I had anything to do with it, there was going to be one dead script boss up there.

And who should I run into on the 229th floor but old Berbelot himself. The perfume king had blood in his eye. Through the haze of anger that surrounded me, I began to realize that things were about to be very tough on Griff. And I was quite ready to help out all I could.

Berbelot saw me at the same instant, and seemed to read my thought. “Come on,” he said briefly, and together we ran the gantlet of secretaries and assistants and burst into Griff’s office.

Griff rose to his feet and tried to look dignified, with little success. I leaped over his glass desk and pulled the wings of his stylish open-necked collar together until he began squeaking.

Berbelot seemed to be enjoying it. “Don’t kill him, Hamilton,” he said after a bit. “I want to.”

I let the script man go. He sank down to the floor, gasping. He was like a scared kid, in more ways than

one. It was funny.

We let him get his breath. He climbed to his feet, sat down at his desk, and reached out toward a battery of push buttons. Berbelot snatched up a Dow-metal paper knife and hacked viciously at the chubby hand. It retreated.

"Might I ask," said Griff heavily, "the reason for this unprovoked rowdiness?"

Berbelot cocked an eye at me. "Might he?"

"He might tell us what this monkey business is all about," I said.

Griff cleared his throat painfully. "I told both you ... er ... gentlemen over the phone that, as far as I know, there was nothing amiss in our interpretation of your play, Mr. Hamilton, nor in the commercial section of the broadcast, Mr. Berbelot. After your protests over the wire, I made it a point to see the second half of the broadcast myself. Nothing was wrong. And as this is the first commercial color broadcast, it has been recorded. If you are not satisfied with my statements, you are welcome to see the recording yourselves, immediately."

What else could we want? It occurred to both of us that Griff was really up a tree; that he was telling the truth as far as he knew it, and that he thought we were both screwy. I began to think so myself.

Berbelot said, "Griff, didn't you hear that dialogue near the end, when those two kids were by that sea wall?"

Griff nodded.

"Think back now," Berbelot went on. "What did the boy say to the girl when he put his muzzle into her hair?"

" 'I love you,' " said Griff self-consciously, and blushed. "He said it twice."

Berbelot and I looked at each other. "Let's see that

recording,” I said.

Well, we did, in Grills luxurious private projection room. I hope I never have to live through an hour like that again. If it weren’t for the fact that Berbelot was seeing the same thing I saw, and feeling the same way about it, I’d have reported to an alienist. Because that program came off Griffis projector positively shimmering with innocuousness. My script was A-1; Berbelot’s plugs were right. On that plug that had started everything, where the man and the girl were gabbing in the theater lobby, the dialogue went like this:

“And how do you like the play, Mr. Robinson?”

“Utterly charming ... and that goes for you, too, my dear. What is that perfume you are using?”

“Berbelot’s Doux Reves. What do you think of it?”

“You heard what I said about the play.”

Well, there you are. And by the recording, Griff had been right about the repetitious three little words in the Azores sequence. I was floored.

After it was over, Berbelot said to Griff: “I think I can speak for Mr. Hamilton when I say that if this is an actual recording, we owe you an apology; also when I say that we do not accept your evidence until we have compiled our own. I recorded that program as it came over my set, as I have recorded all my advertising. We will see you tomorrow, and we will bring that sound film. Coming, Hamilton?”

I nodded and we left, leaving Griff to chew his lip.

I’d like to skip briefly over the last chapter of that evening’s nightmare. Berbelot picked up a camera expert on the way, and we had the films developed within an hour after we arrived at the fantastic “house that perfume built.” And if I was crazy, so was Berbelot: and if he was, then so was the camera. So help me, that blasted program came out on Berbelot’s

screen exactly as it had on my set and his. If anyone ever took a long-distance cussing out, it was Griff that night. We figured, of course, that he had planted a phony recording on us, so that we wouldn't sue. He'd do the same thing in court, too. I told Berbelot so. He shook his head.

"No, Hamilton, we can't take it to court. Associated gave me that broadcast, the first color commercial, on condition that I sign away their responsibility for 'incomplete, or inadequate, or otherwise unsatisfactory performance.' They didn't quite trust that new apparatus, you know."

"Well, I'll sue for both of us, then," I said.

"Did they buy all rights?" he asked.

"Yes ... damn! They got me, too! They have a legal right to do anything they want." I threw my cigarette into the electric fire, and snapped on Berbelot's big television set, tuning it to Associated's XZB.

Nothing happened.

"Hey! Your set's on the bum!" I said. Berbelot got up and began fiddling with the dial. I was wrong. There was nothing the matter with the set. It was Associated. All of their stations were off the air—all four of them. We looked at each other.

"Get XZW," said Berbelot. "It's an Associated affiliate, under cover. Maybe we can—"

XZW blared out at us as I spun the dial. A dance program, the new five-beat stuff. Suddenly the announcer stuck his face into the transmitter.

"A bulletin from Iconoscope News Service," he said conversationally. "FCC has clamped down on Associated Television. And its stations. They are off the air. The reasons were not given, but it is surmised that it has to do with a little strong language used on the world premiere of Associated's new color transmission. That is all."

"I expected that," smiled Berbelot. "Wonder how

Griff'll alibi himself out of that? If he tries to use that recording of his, I'll most cheerfully turn mine over to the government, and we'll have him for perjury."

"Sorta tough on Associated, isn't it?" I said.

"Not particularly. You know these big corporations. Associated gets millions out of their four networks, but those millions are just a drop in the bucket compared with the other pies they've got their fingers in. That color technique, for instance. Now that they can't use it for a while, how many other outfits will miss the chance of bidding for the method and equipment? They lose some advertising contracts, and they save by not operating. They won't even feel it. I'll bet you'll see color transmission within forty-eight hours over a rival network."

He was right. Two days later Cineradio had a color broad-cast scheduled, and all hell broke loose. What they'd done to the Berbelot hour and my "Seashell" was really tame.

The program was sponsored by one of the antigravity industries— I forget which. They'd hired Raouls Stavisk, the composer, to play one of the ancient Gallic operas he'd exhumed. It was a piece called "Carmen" and had been practically forgotten for two centuries. News of it had created quite a stir among music lovers, although, personally, I don't go for it. It's too barbaric for me. Too hard to listen to, when you've been hearing five-beat air your life. And those old-timers had never heard of a quarter tone.

Anyway, it was a big affair, televised right from the huge Citizens' Auditorium. It was more than half full—there were about 130,000 people there. Practically all of the select high-brow music fans from that section of the city. Yes, 130,000 pairs of eyes saw that show in the flesh, and countless millions saw it on their own sets; remember that.

Those that saw it at the Auditorium got their money's worth, from what I hear. They saw the complete opera; saw it go off as scheduled. The coloratura, Maria Jeff, was in perfect voice, and

Stavisk's orchestra rendered the ancient tones perfectly. So what?

So, those that saw it at home saw the first half of the program the same as broadcast—of course. But—and get this—they saw Maria Jeff, on a close-up, in the middle of an aria, throw back her head, stop singing, and shout raucously: “The hell with this! Whip it up, boys!”

They heard the orchestra break out of that old two-four music—“Habaiiera,” I think they called it—and slide into a wicked old-time five-beat song about “alco-pill Alice,” the girl who didn’t believe in eugenics. They saw her step lightly about the stage, shedding her costume—not that I blame her for that; it was supposed to be authentic, and must have been warm. But there was a certain something about the way she did it.

I’ve never seen or heard of anything like it. First, I thought that it was part of the opera, because from what I learned in school I gather that the ancient people used to go in for things like that. I wouldn’t know. But I knew it wasn’t opera when old Stavisk himself jumped up on the stage and started dancing with the prima donna. The televisions flashed around to the audience, and there they were, every one of them, dancing in the aisles. And I mean dancing. Wow!

Well, you can imagine the trouble that that caused. Cineradio, Inc., was flabbergasted when they were shut down by FCC like Associated. So were 130,000 people who had seen the opera and thought it was good. Every last one of them denied dancing in the aisles. No one had seen Stavisk jump on the stage. It just didn’t make sense.

Cineradio, of course, had a recording. So, it turned out, did FCC. Each recording proved the point of its respective group. That of Cineradio, taken by a sound camera right there in the auditorium, showed a musical program. FCC’s, photographed right off a government standard receiver, showed the riot that I and millions of others had seen over the air. It was too much for me. I went out to see Berbelot. The old boy

had a lot of sense, and he'd seen the beginning of this crazy business.

He looked pleased when I saw his face on his house televisior. "Hamilton!" he exclaimed. "Come on in! I've been phoning all over the five downtown boroughs for you!" He pressed a button and the foyer door behind me closed. I was whisked up into his rooms. That combination foyer and elevator of his is a nice gadget.

"I guess I don't have to ask you why you came," he said as we shook hands. "Cineradio certainly pulled a boner, hey?"

"Yes and no," I said. "I'm beginning to think that Griff was right when he said that, as far as he knew, the program was on the up and up. But if he was right, what's it all about? How can a program reach the transmitters in perfect shape, and come out of every receiver in the nation like a practical joker's idea of paradise?"

"It can't," said Berbelot. He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "But it did. Three times."

"Three? When—"

"Just now, before you got in. The secretary of state was making a speech over XZM, Consolidated Atomic, you know. XZM grabbed the color equipment from Cineradio as soon as they were blacked out by FCC. Well, the honorable secretary droned on as usual for just twelve and a half minutes. Suddenly he stopped, grinned into the transmitter, and said, 'Say, have you heard the one about the traveling farmer and the salesman's daughter?' "

"I have," I said. "My gosh, don't tell me he spieled it?"

"Right," said Berbelot. "In detail, over the unsullied air-waves. I called up right away, but couldn't get through. XZM's trunk lines were jammed. A very worried-looking switchboard girl hooked up I don't know how many lines together and announced into them: 'If you people are calling up about the

secretary's speech, there is nothing wrong with it. Now please get off the lines!' "

"Well," I said, "let's see what we've got. First, the broadcasts leave the studios as scheduled and as written. Shall we accept that?"

"Yes," said Berbelot. "Then, since so far no black-and-white broadcasts have been affected, we'll consider that this strange behavior is limited to the polychrome technique."

"How about the recordings at the studios? They were in polychrome, and they weren't affected."

Berbelot pressed a button, and an automatic serving table rolled out of its niche and stopped in front of each of us. We helped ourselves to smokes and drinks, and the table returned to its place.

"Cineradio's wasn't a television recording. Hamilton. It was a sound camera. As for Associated's ... I've got it! Griffis recording was transmitted to his recording machines by wire, from the studios! It didn't go out on the air at all!"

"You're right. Then we can assume that the only programs affected are those in polychrome, actually aired. Fine, but where does that get us?"

"Nowhere," admitted Berbelot. "But maybe we can find out. Come with me."

We stepped into an elevator and dropped three floors. "I don't know if you've heard that I'm a television bug," said my host. "Here's my lab. I flatter myself that a more complete one does not exist anywhere."

I wouldn't doubt it. I never in my life saw a layout like that. It was part museum and part workshop. It had in it a copy of a genuine relic of each and every phase of television down through the years, right from the old original scanning-disk sets down to the latest three-dimensional atomic jobs. Over in the corner was an extraordinarily complicated mass of apparatus which I recognized as a polychrome transmitter.

“Nice job, isn’t it?” said Berbelot. “It was developed in here, you know, by one of the lads who won the Berbelot scholarship.” I hadn’t known. I began to have real respect for this astonishing man.

“Just how does it work?” I asked him.

“Hamilton.” he said testily, “we have work to do. I would he talking all night if I told you. But the general idea is that the vibrations sent out by this transmitter are all out of phase with each other. Tinting in the receiver is achieved by certain blendings of these out-of-phase vibrations as they leave this rig. The effect is a sort of irregular vibration—a vibration in the electromagnetic waves themselves, resulting in a totally new type of wave which is still receivable in a standard set.”

“I see,” I lied. “Well, what do you plan to do?”

“I’m going to broadcast from here to my country place up north. It’s eight hundred miles away from here, which ought to be sufficient. My signals will be received there and automatically returned to us by wire.” He indicated a receiver standing close by. “If there is any difference between what we send and what we get, we can possibly find out just what the trouble is.”

“How about FCC?” I asked. “Suppose—it sounds funny to say it—but just suppose that we get the kind of strong talk that came over the air during my ‘Seashell’ number?”

Berbelot snorted. “That’s taken care of. The broadcast will be directional. No receiver can get it but mine.”

What a man! He thought of everything. “O.K.,” I said. “Let’s go.”

Berbelot threw a couple of master switches and we sat down in front of the receiver. Lights blazed on, and through a bank of push buttons at his elbow, Berbelot maneuvered the transmitting cells to a point above and behind the receiver, so that we could see and be seen

without turning our heads. At a nod from Berbelot I leaned forward and switched on the receiver.

Berbelot glanced at his watch. "If things work out right, it will be between ten and thirty minutes before we get any interference." His voice sounded a little metallic. I realized that it was coming from the receiver as he spoke.

The images cleared on the view-screen as the set warmed up. It gave me an odd sensation. I saw Berbelot and myself sitting side by side—just as if we were sitting in front of a mirror, except that the images were not reversed. I thumbed my nose at myself, and my image returned the compliment.

Berbelot said: "Go easy, boy. If we get the same kind of interference the others got, your image will make something out of that." He chuckled.

"Damn right," said the receiver.

Berbelot and I stared at each other, and back at the screen. Berbelot's face was the same, but mine had a vicious sneer on it. Berbelot calmly checked with his watch. "Eight forty-six," he said. "Less time each broadcast. Pretty soon the interference will start with the broadcast, if this keeps up."

"Not unless you start broadcasting on a regular schedule," said Berbelot's image.

It had apparently dissociated itself completely from Berbelot himself. I was floored.

Berbelot sat beside me, his face frozen. "You see?" he whispered to me. "It takes a minute to catch up with itself. Till it does, it is my image."

"What does it all mean?" I gasped.

"Search me," said the perfume king.

We sat and watched. And so help me, so did our images.

They were watching us!

Berbelot tried a direct question. "Who are you?" he asked. "Who do we look like?" said my image; and both laughed uproariously.

Berbelot's image nudged mine. "We've got 'em on the run, hey, pal?" it chortled.

"Stop your nonsense!" said Berbelot sharply. Surprisingly, the merriment died.

"Aw," said my image plaintively. "We don't mean anything by it. Don't get sore. Let's all have fun. I'm having fun."

"Why, they're like kids!" I said.

"I think you're right," said Berbelot.

"Look," he said to the images, which sat there expectantly, pouting. "Before we have any fun, I want you to tell me who you are, and how you are coming through the receiver, and how you messed up the three broadcasts before this."

"Did we do wrong?" asked my image innocently. The other one giggled.

"High-spirited sons o' guns, aren't they?" said Berbelot. "Well, are you going to answer my questions, or do I turn the transmitter off?" he asked the images.

They chorused frantically: "We'll tell! We'll tell! Please don't turn it off!"

"What on earth made you think of that?" I whispered to Berbelot.

"A stab in the dark," he returned. "Evidently they like coming through like this and can't do it any other way but on the polychrome wave."

"What do you want to know?" asked Berbelot's image, its lip quivering.

"Who are you?"

"Us? We're ... I don't know. You don't have a name for us, so how can I tell you?"

“Where are you?”

“Oh, everywhere. We get around.”

Berbelot moved his hand impatiently toward the switch.

The images squealed: “Don’t! Oh, please don’t! This is fun!”

“Fun, is it?” T growled. “Come on, give us the story, or we’ll black you out!”

My image said pleadingly: “Please believe us. It’s the truth. We’re everywhere.”

“What do you look like?” I asked. “Show yourselves as you are!”

“We can’t,” said the other image. “because we don’t ‘look’ like anything. We just ... are, that’s all.”

“We don’t reflect light,” supplemented my image.

Berbelot and I exchanged a puzzled glance. Berbelot said, “Either somebody is taking us for a ride or we’ve stumbled on something utterly new and unheard-of.”

“You certainly have,” said Berbelot’s image earnestly. “We’ve known about you for a long time—as you count time—”

“Yes,” the other continued “We knew about you some two hundred of your years ago. We had felt your vibrations for a long time before that, but we never knew just who you were until then.”

“Two hundred years—” mused Berbelot. “That was about, the time of the first atomic-powered television sets.”

“That’s right!” said my image eagerly. “It touched our brain currents and we could see and hear. We never could get through to you until recently, though, when you sent us that stupid thing about a seashell.”

“None of that, now,” I said angrily, while Berbelot chuckled.

“How many of you are there?” he asked them.

“One, and many. We are finite and infinite. We have no size or shape as you know it. We just ... are.”

We just swallowed that without comment. It was a bit big. “How did you change the programs? How are you changing this one?” Berbelot asked.

“These broadcasts pass directly through our brain currents. Our thoughts change them as they pass. It was impossible before; we were aware, but we could not be heard. This new wave has let us be heard. Its convolutions are in phase with our being.”

“How did you happen to pick that particular way of breaking through?” I asked. “I mean all that wisecracking business.”

For the first time one of the images—Berbelot’s—looked abashed. “We wanted to be liked. We wanted to come through to you and find you laughing. We knew how. Two hundred years of listening to every single broadcast, public and private, has taught us your language and your emotions and your ways of thought. Did we really do wrong?”

“Looks as if we have walked into a cosmic sense of humor,” remarked Berbelot to me.

To his image: “Yes, in a way, you did. You lost three huge companies their broadcasting licenses. You embarrassed exceedingly a man named Griff and a secretary of state. You”—he chuckled—“made my friend here very, very angry. That wasn’t quite the right thing to do, now, was it?”

“No,” said my image. It actually blushed. “We won’t do it any more. We were wrong. We are sorry.”

“Aw, skip it,” I said. I was embarrassed myself. “Everybody makes mistakes.”

“That is good of you,” said my image on the television screen. “We’d like to do something for you. And you, too, Mr.—”

“Berbelot,” said Berbelot. Imagine introducing yourself to a television set!

“You can’t do anything for us,” I said, “except to stop messing up color televising.”

“You really want us to stop, then?” My image turned to Berbelot’s. “We have done wrong. We have hurt their feelings and made them angry.”

To us: “We will not bother you again. Good-by!”

“Wait a minute!” I yelled, but I was too late. The view-screen showed the same two figures, but they had lost their peculiar life. They were Berbelot and me. Period.

“Now look what you’ve done,” snapped Berbelot.

He began droning into the transmitter: “Calling interrupter on polychrome wave! Can you hear me? Can you hear me? Calling—”

He broke off and looked at me disgustedly. “You dope,” he said quietly, and I felt like going off into a corner and bursting into tears.

Well, that’s all. The FCC trials reached a “person or persons unknown” verdict, and color broadcasting became a universal reality. The world has never learned, until now, the real story of that screwy business. Berbelot spent every night for three months trying to contact that ether-intelligence, without success. Can you beat it? It waited two hundred years for a chance to come through to us and then got its feelings hurt and withdrew!

My fault, of course. That admission doesn’t help any. I wish I could do something—